

Camelot @ The Muny

Music by Frederick Loewe

Lyrics and Book by Alan Jay Lerner

Based on *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White

Adaptation by David Lee

Orchestrations by Steve Orich

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I love it when the Muny performs revised versions of musicals that don't age well, mainly because I experience schadenfreude when I see musical theatre purists who have nothing more athletic to do lose their minds that the Muny is "ruining" their favorite musical. When it came to the Muny's recent production of *Camelot*, there was blood in the water of the purest kind. *Camelot* is an inherently flawed show, and it has gone through many different script revisions – one person's *Camelot* is different from another. Everybody is going to be mad, no matter what version you do. Fans of *Camelot* are never satisfied. The Muny decided to go in a very bold, very experimental direction by producing the small cast version of the show that is currently available for licensing through Music Theatre International. Considering the sheer size of the Muny's stage, this seems like a bizarre move on paper. But after actually seeing it, I found that the Muny made it work.

The small-cast *Camelot* reframes the story as a performance put on by a troupe of 18 traveling players, accompanied by a small nine-piece orchestra, ostensibly set on the Muny stage itself. The video design by Kylee Loera shows images of trees and foliage that blend very well with the Muny's outdoor environment. The scenic design by Ann Beyersdorfer consists of scaffolding that looks like it was hauled out from backstage. The costumes by Tristan Raines are a mashup of regal attire and modern street dress that look like they were either salvaged from the Muny's wardrobe or cobbled together from the cast's closets. Enhancing the atmosphere are Tommy Kurzman's hair and makeup, Shelby Loera's lights, and John Shivers and David Patridge's sound.

David Lee, the writer of the small-cast *Camelot*, removed about 45 minutes of material from the original script; in the process, the characters of Merlin, Nimue, Morgan Le Fay, and King Pellinore have all been cut, as well as their songs (Merlin is mentioned in a few key scenes, however). According to Lee, he made this choice so that the show could focus purely on the heart of the story: the relationship between King Arthur, Queen Guenevere, and Sir Lancelot — a relationship that brought about the ruination of the court of Camelot and the Round Table. Lee goes on to say that all of the pomp and pageantry that is usually associated with *Camelot* distracts the audience from the fact that this show is, at its heart, a political drama. A medieval *House of Cards*, if you will. Think about it: *Camelot* is a story about a polyamorous relationship between three people that is tragically broken by the society they live in, even to the point of starting an all-out war over it. Trading off the original script's naturalistic style doesn't give the

audience a chance to see grandiose sets and costumes, but it does make the drama much more realistic and relevant to our times. Yes, there is a difference between naturalism and realism, look it up.

Director Matt Kunkel fully understands the political thriller side of *Camelot* and the high emotional stakes that are involved here; he stages the production at a rapid clip, not really focusing on creating moments of magic as much as on keeping the story and characters real. Robert Petkoff as Arthur, Shereen Pimentel as Guenevere, and Brandon S. Chu as Lancelot are a collective revelation. These characters are played in far too many productions of *Camelot* as stoic, saccharine, and studly; the problem with that is it overemphasizes the point of the characters, which makes the audience miss the immaturity that defines the story's conflict. The three leads in this production infuse their roles with rebelliousness, sass, determination, restlessness, genuine youthful energy, and soaring vocals (courtesy of musical director Abdul Hamid Royal) that more than makes up for the minimal production design. Sparks fly whenever they share the stage.

Barrett Riggins plays the dual roles of Dap, Lancelot's squire who performs some fun physical comedy in Act One, and Mordred, Arthur's illegitimate son from a previous relationship who enters Act Two to try and take over Camelot. As Dap, Riggins does an excellent job of not being overbearing with the physical comedy, only performing what will enhance the moment. As Mordred, Riggins gives the character an over-the-top gleefulness, congratulating himself that he is proving the Round Table was a bad idea from the start. Riggins's Mordred really makes me miss how you don't see many unapologetically evil villains anymore, even though they are so much fun to watch. Evan Ruggiero as Sir Dinadan, Daryl Tofa as Sir Lionel, and Sarah Quinn Taylor as Sir Sagamore make their knights at turns overtly cocky and easy to be manipulated. Riley Carter Adams as the precocious Tom of Warwick leads the ensemble in a genuinely heartwarming ending, and all of them adeptly perform Beth Crandall's stylish choreography that enhances the production's ritualism.

The words that keep coming to my mind when I think of this production are "genuine," "youthful," and "heartfelt." The small-cast *Camelot* is, quite frankly, a revelation; I'm glad that it was performed at the Muny because it's giving the largest possible audience the opportunity to see this epic story be brought back down to earth. However, I am interested in seeing how this *Camelot* plays in a much smaller venue, like a black box theater, to see if the experimental theatre of the mind format works better there than on the massive Muny stage. I'll be shocked if this really is the last time I see this version of the show in St. Louis. I look forward to seeing what other dated show the Muny will tackle next...and yes, I will be delighting in the fruitless cries of the musical theatre purists. Oh, how they make me laugh.